



The Two Children Left Behind
Ink on paper, 1992, 40 cm x 27 cm

The Two Children Left Behind

Told by Frank Kenneth of Emil Lowi

This is the story. It is about a man and his wife. They had two children. One of them was a girl and the other was a boy. The girl was about ten years old while the boy was only about two years of age. He did not grow up properly and this caused him to be unable to look after himself. He needed to be given special attention because of his disability.

The mother and the father of the children were keen gardeners and spent a lot of their time in the garden. They wanted to have a large garden with plenty of yams. So they cleared a large area of land for the garden. They allowed the bush that they'd cut to dry in the sun for a few days. When it had dried enough, they set fire to it and burned it all to ashes. In the past, people used fire to clean up the place, as there were no tools such as knives and axes to make their gardens like people use today. Whenever the man and his wife went to their garden, their children were left behind at home. The girl was left to care for her handicapped brother. Each day they did the same thing, going away to work in the garden while the children stayed behind at home, with the girl charged with special responsibility over her handicapped brother.

The girl grew tired of looking after her brother every day for the whole day while their parents were out in the garden. The boy used to cry the whole time because he suffered from his physical condition and he longed for his parents to return home. His sister especially used to wish their parents could come home sooner every day. The parents used to return home very late every day.

One day the girl said to her parents, "Mum and dad, let us come with you to the garden." The father said, "That's alright. You can stay outside the garden fence and play there while we burn up the rubbish and prepare the ground for planting."

Once at the garden, the little boy started crying again. The girl called out to her father saying, "Dad, the boy is crying." Her father said, "Tell your mother about it." The girl then called out to her mother saying, "Mum, the boy is crying, come and let him drink milk from your breast. He might be hungry." But her mother said, "Just wait a few minutes until I have burnt up this tree, and then I shall come over." As soon as she had finished burning the tree, however, she moved on to another tree because she wanted to get the ground ready for planting.

The mother repeated this, going from one tree to another. Again her daughter called out louder to her mother, saying, "Mum, come and let the boy drink milk from your breast." The woman simply reacted as before. The poor child cried until he was exhausted. He could not cry anymore. He stopped crying. He was hungry, and his sister shared some of her food with him. Their mother thought, "Oh, they are alright." She thought that the children were close enough for her to keep an eye on them.

Again the daughter called out to her mother, "Mum, come over quickly, the boy is crying and hungry; come let him drink milk out of your breast." The girl took pity on her brother, saying to herself, "My mother is not at all considerate toward my brother." She had been the only one taking care of the boy. Then she too cried, her tears running down her cheeks, because she felt it was not right.

The girl then stood up and picked up her brother without letting her parents know and took him to the other side of the island. Their mother was totally unaware of what was happening. She was glad, as she was now able to concentrate on her garden without interruption from her daughter. She thought that the children were still around near the garden. Meanwhile, the girl walked quietly away until she got far enough away not to be seen or heard by her mother. Then from there she turned and, still carrying her brother, walked onto the reef. On the reef the girl sang:

Solsol betrenai a betaseba solsol o
Solsol betrenai a betaseba solsol o

The song said, "If you would rather burn the trees and not care about us, go ahead as you please." Then the girl sang the song a second time and a third time.

The father heard the singing in the garden and turned to say to his wife, "Listen to the sound of the song. Who would be singing that?" His wife answered, "Oh, that is just the sound that the wind makes as it blows through the tree leaves." The girl sang the same song again, the second

time. Again her father heard it and said to his wife, “No, it really is the sound of singing.” He then stood up to listen more carefully, as the girl sang the song once more. “It’s the voice of the girl!” he said. They both then walked down to the beach on the other side of the island to check. They saw that their children were now at the edge of the reef. The mother quickly ran after the children, but the girl was now singing the song for the last time. The mother went after them but was unable to reach them. The girl then called back to her parents saying, “Turn your eyes to the shore and see, our house is on fire.” As the parents turned their eyes away from the children to see the fire, the girl and her brother jumped off the edge of the reef and drowned themselves in the deep water.

Their daughter had warned them about this when she had said in the past, “You have ignored us—your own children—because you have concentrated all your attention on your garden.” That was the cause of the tragedy of the children’s deaths.

The parents returned home sad and brokenhearted over the loss of their children. They thought of their children but they were gone—nowhere to be found. They were dead. They cried and cried but to no avail.



Detail from *The Two Children Left Behind*, by Ralph Regenvanu. 1992.